



Remembering the Old Professor:
Kenneth Joshua Fielding

WHEN WORD came from Edinburgh that my honored mentor and beloved friend was soon to pass from this earth, I found empathy with Walt Whitman who waited dutifully each day at the docks of New York to learn if Carlyle had passed. I now fully understood Whitman's trauma. A sense of helplessness pervades. The wait is excruciating; the news inevitably tragic. Thoughts of time past flicker through pent-up memory—the good times and, yes, the sad times. The corporeal life of Kenneth Joshua Fielding, scholar celebrated, has ended. His death is a matter of record; his star now among the heavens. If we pause for just a moment, if we listen ever so silently, we can still hear the plaintive cry of Whitman when the news finally arrived, "The Great Man is Dead!" The Old Professor, as I affectionately called him, struggled to the end. He seemed to

have heeded in those closing days my oft-repeated injunction of the poet that he was not to go gentle into that goodnight. Eheu! I now feel guilty for urging this of him. One ought to be allowed to die in peace, free of moral imperative. Ah, me!

For those of us who knew the Old Professor intimately, and for those of you who knew K. J. Fielding professionally, we must surely agree: he was a scholar of extraordinary talent and dedication. Without his dogged determination to pursue primary texts, without those endlessly stellar footnotes, without those rhapsodic introductions, his enduring and last devotion, *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, would have very quickly been relegated to the ash-heap of convention. Without that same dogged determination, the *Carlyle Newsletter* would not have seen the light of day, and, thus, the *Carlyle Studies Annual* in its various iterations would be like a grain of sand lost in wind. Without that continued dogged determination, Carlyle scholarship as we know it would be lost in the fog-bound back-alleys of theoretical conundrum. Without . . . the list is endless and hardly needs further specification. To aver that the Old Professor changed the course of how we perceive matters Victorian seems but a lame-laden litotes. His imprint can be found throughout Victorian letters; his legacy confirmed in the numerous books and hundreds of papers and lectures that now represent the lasting archive of his life. He was, as the University of Edinburgh proudly recognized, *the* Saintsbury Professor of English Literature.

Yet to me, driving my sense of obligation here, there was another Old Professor, one not known to the Victorian legions who saw him as a tweed-suited, slightly dyspeptic Dickensian ectype, sitting atop the Devil's Den, David Hume Tower, looking out over God's Grandeur, Arthur's Seat. To be sure, he was an imposing tall, gaunt figure, who seldom tolerated nonsense, who deplored cant, and who on legendary occasion would erupt into Vesuvian flame. This was the KJF most people knew, and many feared. But there was another side to his character, a softness, a quietness, even a discernible humility. He especially liked to sit quietly, eyes dancing with pride, as one of his myriad students, now professors in their own right, launched forth, imperfectly but passionately, on this or that. On occasion, he would interrupt his self-imposed silence to correct an indiscretion or to embellish a

pivotal point. As he grew older he seemed to relish even more those periods of silence, sitting sageful over a cup of tea and a scone, leaving it to others to pontificate on the mundane while he dreamed the dream.

What I remember most about the Old Professor, at least in the later years, was his polished wit, both in its Renaissance and Modern senses. He was wise, almost to a fault; he was clever, almost without peer. He knew everything worth knowing about Charles Dickens, his first love, and Thomas Carlyle, his second. I once urged him, partly in tease and partly in earnest, to take his knowledge to a British game program called “Brain Busters,” or some such sappy title, where he would be asked the most minute of minutae on a subject of his choice. “Choose Dickens!” I exhorted. After all, the prize was fit for a King (or Queen). The Old Professor scoffed at the suggestion, pointing out that he would likely confuse the first give-away question: “Who is the hero of *Oliver Twist*?” So, I assumed the guise and asked the question. His droll, but pitched response, “Fagin!” He was like that; he could disarm you with a single word or choice phrase. When I pressed him further, asking him in what shire was Carlyle born, he responded, characteristically, over his oaten cake laced with malt, “Don’t be silly.” Humor, quite often biting and sarcastic, was like a rapier in the hands of the Old Professor. He loved to parry. Twit him and the twit was returned threefold. But the truth is he loved to be teased, and even more he loved to be pampered.

The Old Professor was himself a born teaser. He relished the role. He would deliberately (I think) double-clutch his car around Scotland, dodging sheep and homo sapiens alike with carefree abandon. One chose never to ride with him, if one had a choice. But his English-born pride was strong, and too often one had to submit to what seemed certain death. I once made the mistake, almost fatal, of riding shotgun to the Crammond Inn via the Queens Ferry. Drams of scotch and pints of bitters were not enough to calm shaken confidence and dissevered nerves. The last quarter mile to the pub, past the kirk and over the hill, are seared in memory. I have never fully recovered. On another memorable occasion we headed out to Greywalls at Muirfield, the five-star experience he always chose if I were treating. (That he always ordered Aberdeen angus in such East Lothian refinement led to another round of teasing, and drink!) And surely, if it were

not for my wife Anita, I almost wrote Helpmate, whom for reasons inexplicable he would listen to, we no doubt would have cleaved the fields of mustard rape and ended forever in the hallowed depths of the Firth. To compound the agony, the Old Professor insisted, voice rising to that familiar nasal pitch that was his alone, that he was an “exquisite” wheelsman, capable of negotiating any thoroughfare, no matter the RPM or the KPH. Still motoring with him had certain compensations, much superior in fact to trailing behind him on a hike up Greenhead Ghyll in his revered Lake Country. He loved the poem “Michael,” and he loved even more imitating its “unusual” hero. He knew his capacity, and your lack of it. Footpaths were his joy. It would please him to no end to see you huff and puff, as he easily navigated the alleged “short path” Wordsworth often took from Grasmere to Ambleside!

Such memories of the Old Professor are emblazoned in my consciousness. He was a legend in his own time. He was of immense and enduring help to me. When I asked him to write on my behalf to the Fulbright or to the NEH, the letter went in punctually; when I asked him to introduce me to this librarian or that library, the nonpareil introduction was made; and, when I asked him to read my extensive notes to *Sartor Resartus*, they were returned with reams of substantial commentary. Generosity marked his being. He especially treasured fixing notes, getting them right, exactly right. He was not Casaubon; he was what Casaubon could never be. He lived for discovery. I can still see him walking along with that crane-like gait, urging others to hurry along, for there was a schedule to meet, an idea to run down, tea to be had. As an academic, the Old Professor lived an Alice-in-Wonderland life, assuming every guise imaginable, from that of the hashish-ameliorated Caterpillar (whom I believe to be Carlyle, by the way) to that of the mercurial Mad Hatter. He seemed always in a hurry, scurrying here, then there, as if life depended on it. His “As ever” letters bespoke urgency. His energy was indefatigable.

There was, sadly, another side to the Old Professor. He suffered it with uncommon reserve and with quiet dignity. It is a history about which he remained largely silent. He had endured shattering trials and tribulations, not the least of which was the death of his only daughter, his only child, Janet, from a sudden asthmatic attack, and later the long and painful death of his wife

Jean. His was guarded about speaking of either, especially of the former, his most intense personal pain. It was not a subject I ever raised, but it came up once when we were ruminating on what choices Michael had when word came that he had lost his cherished son Luke. I remember vividly the very moment in his Grange Loan parlor when the choice of suicide was entertained. Suddenly, his eyes glistened with tears. Tragedy had entered the room. The acuteness of the pain had overcome him. I admonished him, "Old Professor, you would never entertain such thoughts?" His response conveyed his anguish, "You must never presume. . . ." At that moment of confession my wife entered the room. He turned away. His thought was lost, gone forever. I was somehow relieved, unburdened by her fortunate intrusion. The Old Professor and I never raised the subject again. We did not have to. He had spoken; I had listened.

My final visit with the Old Professor was in the spring of 2003, or was it 2002? We had our usual fun week together, laughing at and lamenting over the foibles of the profession, life's microcosm. We went to fabulous dinners; we took day-trips to his favorite haunts (I drove!); and we stopped at his favorite pubs for a pint, although in his last years he tried always to limit himself. He spoke lovingly and faithfully of his cherished companion Jean, who had breathed fresh life into him, and who, when it was time, sat stoically with him at the end. A lovely, spirited woman is Jean. The Old Professor spoke of times past and matters present. We each spoke of what was, what is, and what we wished could be. Somehow we knew this might be the last time we could air differences and renew affections. We continued our epic argument about God and Christ in the life of Carlyle, but especially in the fabric of *Sartor Resartus*. He thought Carlyle to be ambivalent about Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. I professed otherwise. Upon reflection I have come to realize that the Old Professor was speaking of his own ambivalence, not Carlyle's. Life's experiences had driven him there. I had missed the clue. I wrote to him several times later about this subject, but writing lacks the inflection, the pause, the point and the counterpoint of conversation. I was not there to sing him back home before he died. I was not there for his funeral. As I told him on a number of occasions, unlike Emily Dickinson I do not handle mortality well. I did write him a lengthy letter of acknowledgment and of love

when the word came that Death was hovering. Alas, the letter arrived too late for him to hold. Jean assures me that she whispered its contents in his ear. Borrowing from the poet James Dickey, I asked him not to be afraid as “Mortality wailed out.” Words were difficult—so many memories to share, so many debts to acknowledge, so many affections to convey. At the close, I bade him “Adieu.” He would understand, I knew, the import of that reference. For those of you who did not know the Old Professor as I did, I beg your forgiveness for this public celebration, this my painful In Memoriam. But for those of you who knew him as I did, you will understand. Listen now, ever so silently, and you will share the poet’s lamentation, “The Great Man is Dead!”

Rodger L. Tarr
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